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ABSTRACT

The problems and implications of language assessment of Asian students are examined. The theories of Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner concerning the relationship between language and cognition are explored. Cognitive operations are assumed by many educators to be related to academic achievement. Culturally, Asians favor the Piagetian interpretation of language and cognition. There are primary differences between language evaluation in Asian countries and the United States. In Asian countries, a student's language proficiency is measured in formal written examinations assessing discrete competence of grammar, composition, literature, dictation, and calligraphy. Specific primary language characteristics may interfere with a student's performance on English language assessment tests. These include the phonology, semantics, and syntax of Asian languages. The academic potential of many Asian students may not be properly assessed because language competence (ability to understand) is often greater than language performance (ability to utilize). Despite some initial language difficulties and low academic placement, many Asian students manage to strive for high educational goals resulting in considerable academic accomplishments. (DWH)

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LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT OF ASIAN STUDENTS:

PROBLEMS & IMPLICATIONS

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PRECIS

Problems and implications of language assessment of Asian students are examined in the light of : (a) Theoretical frameworkof language-cognition from the perspectives of Bruner and Piaget. (b) Assessment objectives and procedures and how this fit into the Asian perspective of language proficiency. (c) Problems of primary language interference in the performance of language assessment tests. An examination of Asian languages characteristics specifically in phonology, semantics and syntax. (d) Implications of academic potential prediction and placement with data support from selected Chicago area Asian bilingual programs.

Language assessment has been the issue of numerous debates in the area of psycholinguistics and educational psychology for many years. The assessment issues revolved around the discussion of how language proficiency is related to interpersonal communication skills and the skills for academic competence. For the language minority Asian students in bilingual programs, assessment of language proficiency (English) is used most commonly for academic placement in the all-English program. In this paper, problems and implications of language assessment of Asian students are examined in the light of the following issues:

I. A conceptual framework of language assessment

II. Language assessment: Objective and procedures

III. Asian language interference in the performance of assessment tests

IV. Implications of language assessment ot the Asian Limited English Proficient students.

V. Conclusion

I. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

One common concern relating to language assessment praticularly to the Asian students has been the following question "To what extent is the assessment of English proficiency related to the assessment of academic achievement?" In other words, how do attributes of language proficiency overlap with the attributes of cognitive operations which are assumed by many educators to be related to academic achievement. To this question, two different

and opposing answers can be offered depending on the theory of negativeness or positiveness of language towards cognition. The negative theorists advocate that cognition does not necessarily have its root in a linguistic base and they tend to object the sole use of language assessment. On the other hand, the positive theorists support the use of language assessment to predict academic achievement.

Jean Piaget (1975) views language as an important facilitator of thought, but not necessarily a prerequisite to cognition. In his words he says

> "It should be noted that language is merely one instance of the symbolic function, and this function as a whole and not language alone, is what causes sensorimotor behaviour to evolve to the level of thought"

Thus language from the Piagetian view is clearly not given the status of a mandatory requirement of thinking.

In contrast to Piaget, Bruner (1964,66) presented an opposing view that language is closely related to cognition. According to Bruner, the structure of any body of knowledge can be characterized by different modes of presentation. At the enactive level, understanding is expressed in terms of actions. At a higher iconic level, children usually express their understanding in terms of pictures. At the highest symbolic level, children are able to translate experience into language. In his words he says

> "In children, language comes to play an increasingly powerful role as an implement of knowing....translation of experience into symbolic form with its attendant means of achieving remote reference, transformation, and combination opens up realms of intellectual possibilities that are orders of magnitude beyond the most powerful image-forming system."

Thus language from the Brunerian view is clearly given a very important place in the cognition process.

From both the Piagetian and Brunerian perspectives of language and cognition, it has been assumed that the internal world of cognition, though complex and abstract, can be related externally by either actions or dialogues through them that people communicate (Wong, 1977). Both opposing interpretations of negativeness and positiveness of language to cognition are essential to the wholesome form of psycholinguistics; however,culturally the Asians are more inclined to favor the Piagetian interpretation of language and cognition.

II. LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: OBJECTIVE AND PROCEDURES

The main objective of language proficiency assessment is sometimes confusing because of conflicting definitions and misinterpretations. Two definitions of language proficiency are examined for discussion. Clark (1979) defines language proficiency as the ability to carry out language-use tasks appropriately and effectively in realistic communication. Burt and Dulay (1978) defines language

proficiency as the degree which an individual shows control over the use of linguistic components. Two major kinds of language proficiency assessment procedures are constructed on two separate assumptions parallel to the above definitions. The integrative test (e.g. Foreign Service Institute-F.S.I) sees that language competence is a unified set of interacting abilities used in real life communication. The discrete point test (e.g. Test of English as a Foreign Language, TOEFL) sees that language competence as the arithmetic sum of all its components (e.g. phonology, grammar etc.) A typical intergrative test procedure includes an oral interview and/or a writing sample. A typical discrete point test procedure includes sets of multiple choice questions divided into grammar, vocabulary, reading and the like.

In many Asian countries, how much a student knows about a language is not directly translated to an integrative linguistic competence but separately as discrete competence of grammar, composition, literature, dictation and caligraphy. For this reason, the Asian perception of language proficiency seems to agree with Burt and Dulay.

Traditionally academic systems in Asia are highly competitive and written examinations are something that students grow up with. Nevertheless, the formats of language examination given are somewhat closer to the integrative than the discrete point test that have been described. Oral interviews are seldom used because Asian culture, in essence, emphasizes more writing than speaking.

Examination questions when given, are mostly in the form of written essay, and multiple choice forms are rarely implemented.

In comparing the primary differences between objective/procedures of language evaluation in the Asian countries and the United States, some basic causes of difficulty for the Asian students taking language assessment become immediately apparent.

III. ASIAN LANGUAGES INTERFERENCE IN THE PERFORMANCE OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT TESTS

In dealing with many linguistic problems of Asian students, teachers usually look critically at one component of the language transitional process - English, and overlook the other half of the process - students' primary languages. In reality, a student's frustration and failure to acquire English that is taken for granted by monolingual English speakers in many instances, comes from specific primary language interference. In this section, some characteristics of the Asian language (the primary language) will be described in order that we may better understand how these characteristics interfere in the students performance of English assessment tests. With this in mind, the following facts are identified to represent some contrasting features between Asian languages (e.g. Cambodian, Chinese, Hmong, Japanese, Korean, Laotian and Vietnamese) in general, and English.

1) Many consonant sounds, e.g., b, d, f, g and z may not occur

in the final position. Even when they occur in the final position, they are not often aspirated and, therefore, barely audible.

2) Verbs do not change form for the present, past and future situations e.g., eat (eats), ate, eaten, eating. (Japanese is the exception.)

3) Articles do not occur; e.g., a, an, the.

4) Plural endings do not occur; e.g., three dog(s).

5) Possessive endings do not occur; e.g., Tom's apple.

6) No common usage of prefixes and suffixes; e.g., <u>un</u>fold,

7) No infinitives occur; e.g., <u>to run</u>.

8) No distinction is made between subjective, objective, and possessive pronouns; e.g., I, me and my. The same word is used for all three cases; e.g., "I go," "They like I," and "Book of I."

9) Word order is different; modifiers and classifiers may follow the words they modify; e.g., "I have bread white

three loaves," or "I have three loaves bread white."

10) No subject - auxillary verb inversion occurs in interrogative statements; e.g., "Does Mary work here?" translates as "Mary works here + a question indicator."

A careful examination from the inventory of facts indicates that although some errors in English can be caused by other variables (e.g., non - rule-governed idiosyncracies), many are obviously caused by interferences with respect ot phonology, semantics, and syntax.

Phonology

a) Many native Asian speakers can distinguish the difference between consonant sounds (fact 1) only when the sounds are presented in an isolated non-speech pattern. This particular situation is, however, speech-specific. Other phonological errors are attributed to the native language syllable structure. Comparatively, it is common to find an Asian student writing better than he speaks because he learns how to first acquire writing, a process quite opposite to learning the primary language.

b) Semantics

Many errors of word meanings and the meanings expressed in the relationship between words are interfered with the morphology of the native language (facts 2,3,4,5,6,7 and 8) found absent

in English. For example, many Asian students have trouble with the use of articles (fact 3) in specific sentence locations because articles simply do not occur in the Asian language.

c) Syntax

An individual usually chooses a word order that is compatible with his native language (facts 9 & 10); consequently, sentence structures are sometimes stiff and awkward from direct literal translations. At other times, the English expression of a student is limited because he avoids making inappropriate transfer from his own language.

Again, a student's failure to master what seems to be simple skills usually comes from a direct opposition between the primary language and English. It is important to caution that language interference alone can influence the performances of language assessment.

Limited English Proficient

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT TO THE ASIAN STUDENTS

From our previous examinations of conceptual framework, objective/procedures and primary language interference, it is not suprising to see why to the Asian students language assessment has been a disputable and touchy matter. The process of academic acquistion is at stake for many students. As the English communicative skills as reflected by the assessment scores are not

well developed for the purpose of learning. Clearly, however, the student may know more than he can communicate in English. This dilemma is often expressed by a statement like; "I know it but I have difficulties in saying it or writing it in English." Noam Chomsky (Chomsky, 1957) and others have pointed out that language competence (the ability to understand language) of a person is often greater than language performance (the ability to use language.) For the Asian students learning a new language (English), this competence-performance difference is even greater. The problem with some language assessment procedures is that they do not truly reflect the academic potential of the student, and because of the assessment score, the students more often suffer underplacement in the academic program.

V. CONCLUSION

Despite some initial language difficulties and low academic placement in the transitional period, many Asian students manage to strive for high educational goals resulting in considerable academic accomplishments. A study (U.S. Today, 1984) of 400 students was presented at the convention of the American Educational Research in New Orleans, April, 1984. The study reported that:

1. Asian-American students are more likely to enroll in college preparatory programs--47 percent take the academic program compared with 37 percent of whites, 29 percent of blacks and 23 percent of Hispanics and Americans Indians.

2. Asian-Americans took 1½ times as many advanced math and science courses as whites and three times more than other minority students.

3. 69 percent of Asian-American students took at least one foreign language compared with 49 percent of whites, 38 percent of Hispanics and 37 percent of Blacks.

4. Asian-American students were more likely than others to particiapte in academic honors clubs, subject-matter clubs and student goverment. They are less likely to participate in community groups, church activities and sports teams.

5. They spend more time on homework than other students.

6. They are less likely to work 15 hours or more a week outside school.

The study concluded that for many Asian students, the quest for academic achievement is supported not just by linguistic competence alone, but by other important variables. Savigon (1983) and Banas(1984) pointed out that language proficiency is only one among other variables that eventually effect student's achievement and success. Other variables like family support, self pride, persistence and previous experiences should also be examined carefully. Language assessment and academic

placement is a complex undertaking that involves a lot of problems and decisions; it is hoped that language assessment should not be misinterpreted as lack of motivation, academic competence and, worse yet, intelligence of the student.

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